Chapter Three

The geography was familiar: the densely wooded hills to the east of Sirkin were the same ones we used for a lot of our exercises. And at least one face was familiar, too, as I began my officers' training course. Uri Zakai had joined Sayeret Matkal a few weeks before me, and we'd become close friends.

But almost everything else was new. If you didn't count my *tironut* in Beersheva, which was by now a distant and unloved memory, this was my first encounter with the *real* army. In our classroom work, especially in the early weeks, I was struck by how little I knew about how ordinary military units actually functioned. For the others in the course – there were about 150 of us, divided into "platoons" of 25 – this was clearly basic stuff: how orders were issued; how supplies or transport were organized; how discipline was enforced. Or the "standard operating procedures" when you found yourself advancing, retreating, or facing enemy fire. My two years in the sayeret had taught me none of this. On our overnight treks, or freelance border crossings – even when we would use live ammunition or explosives in simulated assaults on airbases or bridges or water towers – an "order" was likely to consist of "Ehud, Uzi, cover me on my left." Often, once an exercise began, there would be no orders at all. We would have trained for weeks beforehand. We assumed we knew what we were doing, and I guess everyone trusted himself, and the others, to judge the situation on the ground, to act and react.

I recognized you couldn't run an entire army that way, of course. And I enjoyed learning how things worked beyond the confines of *Kav Chamesh*. It reminded me a bit of how I'd felt about my schoolwork as a young teenager in

Mishmar Hasharon. Very early in my career as a "rogue", Ido, as a form of punishment for his multiple acts of disruption, was sent off to a technical and vocational school in Netanya. When he would come back in the evening, he'd show me his books, and his homework. It was full of mechanical diagrams and designs. And I remember thinking it was a lot more interesting than most of the things we were doing in class. It seemed like learning with a *purpose*. And so did officers' school.

As in any other school, we were given periodic quizzes, and essay assignments, to gauge our progress. I did well on them, with one exception. Each of us was supposed to design a raid for our platoon. We were given a series of case studies from Israeli, British or American attacks, and were taught the "principles" of a successful operation Now, the idea was to apply them: in an operation to destroy planes at the Jordanian airport in Qalandia, on the West Bank. Nearly all the other cadets came up with a broadly similar plan: an explosive charge to breach the perimeter fence, a frontal assault by a core of the platoon, using Uzis to take out any security around the aircraft, while the others provided cover and suppressed fire from other parts of the base.

In the sayeret, we'd simulated an operation against the same target. But even if we hadn't, I doubt I would have framed my plan any differently. After all, the point of the whole operation was to blow up the planes. My plan began, in effect, with giving half of our platoon the night off. I proposed taking a dozen troops to the area, scouting the perimeter for the most vulnerable part of the fence, ensuring it wasn't wired or alarmed, and then cutting an opening just wide enough to crawl through. Then, bypassing the guards at the front of the airport, we'd approach the planes from the far side, place explosives, with a 10-

minute time-delay, on the wheel assemblies of each plane; retrace our steps; fold back the opening we made in the fence. And leave, without anyone even knowing we'd been there.

I got a D, the lowest mark they could give me without failing me outright. I was disappointed, of course. But not too much, and not for long. I had received A's on most of my other work. I did understand why my instructors had marked me down: everything they'd told us before the exercise, and the case studies they'd chosen, pointed towards the more pyrotechnic approach my fellow cadets had proposed. But it was a reflection of the confidence I'd gained during my time in Sayeret Matkal that I was certain that my approach – avoiding needless casualties, still blowing up the aircraft, and returning unnoticed – would be the one that a field commander would follow if Israel again had to face Jordanian soldiers on the battlefield.

And a few weeks later, I had cause to wonder whether the course commanders might actually have agreed with me. As the training drew to an end, there were two major field exercises. The first was to organize a raid, involving not just an individual platoon but the whole complement of cadets. To my surprise, I was chosen to lead it. The whole operation, from planning and briefing, to execution and our return to base, took two days. The aim was to "secure" an impressive beige-stone building that stood in the middle of a pine forest where the central plain of Israel rose to the east towards Jerusalem.

It was on the edge of a kibbutz called Hulda, on the site of an earlier Jewish farming settlement which had been attacked and destroyed by local Arabs twenty years before the birth of the state of Israel. The kibbutz was established

two years later, in 1931, and it lived without incident, in fact in harmony, with the Arab village of Hulda until the 1948 war, when it played a key role in organizing convoys to break the siege of Jerusalem. After an Arab attack on one of the convoys, leaving 22 people dead, Ben-Gurion ordered Jewish settlements to attack and take over Arab villages on the road up to Jerusalem, and the kibbutzniks of Hulda overran the village of Hulda. It was a microcosm of the interlocking suffering, the interlocking histories and narratives, of Jews and Arabs in this one land. And I guess from my perspective – at least then, as a 20-year-old trainee officer about to lead a raid on what remained of the original Jewish settlement – it was a vivid illustration of Dayan's words a few years earlier about the need to stay strong, and to remain ready to fight if necessary, until Israel was truly secure.

I had my own, more benign, history with Hulda. It was the first kibbutz established by Gordonia, just a few years before Mishmar Hasharon, and among its leading figures was a man named Oizer Huldai. He was my mother's first boyfriend, before Ya'akov Margulies, back in Poland. He was the one, she said, who kindled her interest in the Impressionists, which she passed on to me. Oizer ran the kibbutz high school, and his son Ron, a couple of years younger than me, went on to become a fighter pilot and the mayor of Tel Aviv. The Huldai family also adopted a 14-year-old boy who left Jerusalem to join the kibbutz in 1953, in the wake of the tragic death of his mother. The boy's name was Amos Oz, the future novelist and peace campaigner. I met Amos, and of course Ron Huldai, when we were kids. Especially with my mother's connection with Oizer Huldai, I knew a fair number of children my age in Hulda. And since it was the earliest Gordonia kibbutz, it was inevitable, I suppose, that there were other

connections as well. When the older Hulda settlement had been destroyed, among those killed was a man who became a hero in Israel: Ephraim Chitzik, who was standing guard, and died trying to fend off the attack. Chitzik's niece taught me painting in primary school in Mishmar Hasharon.

Once I entered politics, Amos Oz and I had our differences: primarily one-sided, rooted in Amos's criticism of my policies and approach as Prime Minister. But the two of us do agree on the single biggest issue facing Israel: the need, indeed the urgency, for us to end the occupation of the West Bank and pave the way for the establishment of a Palestinian state. Where we diverge, is how we got to that point. Amos is a writer. Along with perhaps David Grossman and A. B. Yehoshua, he is among the greatest of all Israeli writers. In the all-too-rare periods in my life when I have been able simply to sit and read literature, I have delighted in his books, not just his novels, but above all his wonderful, lyrical memoir, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*. But unlike Amos, I came to my conviction about the need for peace, and for two states, as a soldier. It took me longer. The path was rockier, with more twists and turns. Which, I guess, always made me a more cautious and skeptical traveler.

All that lay ahead of me, however, in the spring of 1962, when I began to plot our "raid" on what was left of the original settlement of Hulda. I knew the surrounding terrain better than most of my fellow cadets. Although we'd never staged an exercise in Hulda in the sayeret, we'd often trekked through the area around it. And I had been there, of course, when I was younger. Still, as Meir Har-Zion used to drill into us, simple familiarity was not enough. So I began with detailed, topographical maps. We would be setting off from Ramle, not far from Lod airport. From there, I worked out a route that skirted the main roads,

and the larger towns or settlements, as direct as possible while remaining as inconspicuous as possible. We would go almost due south at first, then edge around another small kibbutz, called Naan, then bend to the southeast toward the pine forest near Hulda. Once I was satisfied with the plan, I delivered an overall briefing for the whole group, followed by a more detailed review with each of the platoons of their particular roles in the "capture" of the building.

I've always been lucky to have the ability to be self-critical, to step outside of myself: to recognize when I've succeeded at something, but also to realize when I've fallen short, and to try to learn the lessons of my failures. Yet that sense of detachment went missing during the several hours of evening briefings before the raid. Not only was this the first operational exercise I'd commanded. It was the first time I'd commanded anything. During the operation itself, a 12-mile hike in each direction which I navigated as part of the lead unit, and the assault by the sayeret-like core who I had selected to capture the target, I was too wrapped up in making sure that everything went to plan to spend time evaluating my own role. It was only a few days later that I got any sense that it had gone well, from comments by a fellow cadet named Uriel Reichman, later one of Israel's leading professors of law. Though we would go on to become good friends, he wasn't in my platoon at the officers' school. He was a soldier in the paratroops' brigade at the time. And he told me that when I'd been briefing the whole group, he had had the sense that I was actually an experienced commander. He also told me that he noticed our instructors, our *real* commanders, nodding approval and scribbling notes as I spoke.

For the final exercise of the course, the commander was another cadet, named Shai Tamari. But in some ways, I found it even more satisfying, and

fulfilling, than leading the exercise in Hulda. Shai was also in another platoon, and I'd barely met him during the course. But I *had* met his older brother, Dovik Tamari. He was a friend of Avraham Arnan, who had been drafted in for occasional help in training us, and would go on to succeed Avraham as commander of the sayeret. I can't remember what our instructors called the final exercise. But it was essentially the same "capture the flag" which I'd played so often on the kibbutz, only writ very large. The 150 cadets were divided in two equal forces. Each was allocated half of a huge area, nearly 60 square miles, in the hills and woodland east of Sirkin. Each of us had to set up a command post somewhere in our territory. The aim, within a maximum of 36 hours, was to locate and capture the other side's HQ.

Very early in the process of planning and allocating roles, Shai asked me and Uri Zakai to act as a separate reconnaissance team. We agreed we'd approach the exercise as if it were an operation in Sayeret Matkal. The key to success, clearly, was to find the other side's command post before they found ours. So Uri and I began by poring over maps of the other team's area and asking ourselves where *we* would place our command post. We narrowed it down to four possibilities. Then we identified a thickly wooded rise, at the very far end of their territory, that seemed to provide a perfect scouting post. Its elevation, and its positioning at the rear of the other side's area, would give us a commanding view of a large part of the terrain. And once we'd got there, we figured that by moving no more than a few hundred meters, from one side of the hill to the other, we would have line-of-sight for three of the potential headquarters sites we had identified. We liked those odds. We were confident that, if nothing else, our sayeret experience would allow us to get to our

observation post, and back again, without being seen. And if the other side's HQ was indeed in one of the places we were scouting, we were confident of getting confirmation of this: an odd vehicle going in or out; "enemy" officers or troops; or maybe just the cackle of a field radio or smoke from a campfire.

We went back to Shai with two suggestions. The first owed as much to my childhood strategy games on the kibbutz as to the sayeret. It involved simple misdirection: Shai would set up not one, but two, command posts, more than a mile apart. The real one would be the less obvious, and better hidden. As for our own role, we proposed to set off deep into the other side's territory the moment that the exercise began, just after nightfall. We told him we were fairly confident of finding their headquarters, maybe that very night, but almost certainly by sometime the next morning.

He enthusiastically signed off on the plan. The only hitch came when he presented it to our instructors, explaining that Uri and I, in our reconnaissance role, would "disappear" once the exercise began. The instructors – three officers who we'd all got to know fairly well during the course – were having none of it. They insisted that in order to evaluate the exercise, at least one of them had to be present for any part of the operation which might prove relevant to the outcome. Shai protested. So did we. The whole point of our role was to be able to sneak in and out, something we knew how to do from the sayeret, but which would become a lot harder, and maybe impossible, if accompanied by an instructor. Eventually, a kind of compromise was reached. There was no way we were going to be allowed in alone: this was an officers' course, after all. We were cadets, and they were in charge. But it was agreed that one of the younger officers, a guy from the Golani Brigade, would come along, dressed in

camouflage fatigues like us, and, obviously, aware that the need to preserve our secrecy and cover mattered more than any on-the-spot evaluation.

As soon as the starting whistle sounded, we headed out. For the first half-mile or so, we moved fairly quickly. From there, we proceeded cautiously, keeping clear of the relatively few open spaces and also avoiding parts of the forest where the leaves or rocks would make it difficult for us to move without making noise. We walked on in total darkness. We never used our flashlights. Uri and I exchanged maybe six or seven words throughout, all in a whisper. We relied on hand signals to communicate. We also used the topography – the nearly three hours of map-work we'd done – to choose a line that would allow us to use the rises and falls in elevation as cover. By nearly midnight, we reached our observation post. We settled in, still saying nothing above a whisper. When dawn came, we reverted to hand signals. It was a little after nine in the morning, at our third lookout site on the hill, that we struck gold. The other side had done at least one thing well: they had located their command post on the back shoulder of a fairly large rise, and placed the entrance at the rear, assuming that this would maximize their ability to see an approaching force, while minimizing the chance of being detected. But our lookout was behind them, and even higher.

The first bit of confirmation that we'd found the right place came when we saw a single cadet leaving an olive-green tent. Then, another one left. A couple of others went in. We heard the sound of something, fairly heavy, falling, inside. Finally, around noon, we spotted the commander himself arriving. In a brief, hushed radio communication after spotting the first couple of cadets, we had told Shai we were almost sure we'd found the command post. By the time we

made our way back into our own HQ – where we gave him further details of where the post was located, how it was defended, and how it could best be approached and taken – he was well under way in mapping out the assault. The exercise was due to end at midnight, so he planned to begin our advance immediately after darkness. The only concern, until then, would be whether the other side somehow managed to locate our command post. They didn't. They did make a somewhat half-hearted attempt at reconnaissance. They sent a single scout, who did not get beyond a mile or so into our area, and returned without finding even our decoy headquarters.

No one patted us on the back when it was over. But that hardly mattered. We felt a sense of shared satisfaction from a plan well designed, well executed, and which had played out almost exactly as Uri and I had hoped. The course formally ended a few days later, in early May 1962. All of the cadets passed. But six from of each graduating group were always singled out to receive their new badge of rank from a senior army commander. I was chosen as one of them. We got our badges from a former Palmachnik who was now deputy chief-of-staff: Yitzhak Rabin.

Before leaving for officer's training, I had been taken aside by Castel's number-two in the sayeret, Menachem Digli, and he gave me what proved to be sage words of advice for the officers' course. He had gone through it a few years before me. "Think of a very dirty swimming pool," he said. He knew that wouldn't be a difficult image for me conjure up. He, like me, had grown up on a kibbutz. "You jump in, you dive underwater. It's filthy. You swim. You can barely see, but then you get to the other end." Officers' school was like that, he told me. "You're not sure, when it's done, how much you've actually learned.

But on the other end, you come out *different*. You go in as a soldier. You come out as a commander. It changes your *attitude*. The mentality, the mind-set, is new. No matter what you go on to do afterwards."

Though I had often recalled his words during the six months I was away, I could have no idea how quickly they would be put to the test when the course was over. Even before it ended, I had heard that Avraham Arnan was back in charge, and that I would indeed be going back to the sayeret. But there was a second bit of news, a couple of months after my return. It was far less expected. And it would prove to be life changing: Sayeret Matkal was, at long last, going to mount its first real cross-border operation.

And, as things turned out, I would be chosen to lead it.

* * *

When I got back to the unit, as Second Lieutenant Ehud Brog, it was pretty obviously nearing a kind of graduation of its own: from a band of highly motivated, loosely organized rogues in uniform, to a fully operational unit. A number of key figures, alongside Avraham, in the unit's creation were now gone, like Yechiel Amsalem, or drifting into a more occasional involvement, Meir Har-Zion. Avraham had now organized the sayeret into two small operational teams, led by officers who had been with us almost from the start, named Yori Cohen and Ya'akov Tubul. The plan, now that I was back and an officer, was for me to command a third team, from recruits we'd take in the

August or November draft intakes a few months later.

Tubul was leading the more experienced of the existing groups, which was made up of recruits who had joined about the time I did. He was originally slated to command the first real operation, when and if it finally came. Yet during my absence, the Sinai cable project, with its fridge-sized intercept machine, had been put on hold. And Tubul – who in addition to being a popular and effective officer had a deep huge talent for the sciences – had been accepted by Israel's main science university, the Technion. So it turned out he would be leaving, too, once the academic year began in September.

Despite the delay in the Sinai plan, Meir Amit still was determined to end Israel's self-imposed moratorium on cross-border intelligence-gathering. So he now chose a different mission. It amazed me then, and it still does, that he managed to persuade the chief-of-staff, and even more so Ben-Gurion, to go along with it. But the new operation would be on the Golan Heights. In fact, in almost precisely the same place, with almost precisely the same aim, as the one that had ended with the suicide of Uri Ilan eight years earlier.

When I came back to the sayeret, Ya'akov Tubul and his team had already completed weeks of preparation, training, and consultation with the technical unit, in anticipation of the Golan mission. But Meir found himself dealing with a serious case of cold feet among the political and military leadership, and had yet to get the final green light. A month passed, then another. In late July, Avraham called me in to see him. With no guarantee we would have the go-ahead before Ya'akov left for the Technion, he told me he wanted me to join the team, train with them, work alongside Ya'akov, meet with the technological unit

to get briefed on the equipment, and be ready to take command of the operation if necessary.

It was a close-run thing. In August, Meir finally told us the mission was approved, but with a caveat. First, we would have to do a dry run, in order to show we were up to the task. The obvious choice was the hills of southern Lebanon. The landscape was less forbidding than the Golan, and the border was less well defended, but there were other obstacles – notably, the prospect of running into local villagers along the way. On the Golan Heights, villagers were unlikely to be a problem. The danger there was soldiers.

Ya'akov commanded the Lebanon operation, with me along as his deputy, and the same three technically trained soldiers who were to be part of the Golan mission. We had a final meeting with the technological unit before setting off. Even in the year since they'd lost their prototype during the failed operation in Gaza, they'd made the bugging device smaller. They had also added a detonator, so that if it was tampered with once we'd swapped it with the real isolator on a telephone pole, the whole thing would explode.

We chose a stretch of roadway near a village called Beit Yahoun. It was on a hill four or five miles inside Lebanon. But since it lay behind the much larger town of Bint Jbeil, we had to snake through fields and fruit groves and approach in a wide arc from behind – something like 10 miles in all. The only problem came when we were about halfway there, and we met a small group of Lebanese farmers walking the other way. Ya'akov, however, was virtually fluent in Arabic: as a kid, he'd worked alongside Arab farmers in the Galilee. He exchanged a few words with them, and we were back on our way. When we

reached Beit Yahoun, he and I served as lookouts as the others climbed the telephone pole and slotted in the listening device. It took maybe 15 minutes in all. In another hour-and-a-half, we were back in Israel. More importantly, the unit worked. And rather than risk its getting discovered, Meir decided we should go back in, a couple of days later, remove the device. This time, I was in command. Ya'akov stayed behind. Though he still had a week or so before going off to the Technion, it was by now clear that I'd be leading the mission onto the Golan Heights.

It would be hard to overstate the pressure felt by everyone, from the chief-of-staff on down, to avoid a repeat of the debacle of 1954. I felt it too. The outline of the operation had been decided weeks earlier. We would set off the from the far northeastern corner of Israel, a small patch of parkland on the top edge of a kibbutz called Dan. It was exactly where the Uri Ilan group's operation had started. Only this time, the target Meir had selected for us was more ambitious. In the 1950s, we had placed the intercept on the telephone line heading south from the Syrians' main forward base on the Golan, near the Banias River, to their military units overlooking the Sea of Galilee. This time, we were hoping to bug the line running east toward Quneitra – the largest town, and the Syrians' military headquarters, on the heights. It was also where Uri Ilan and the others had initially been taken for interrogation. This would mean a longer route, starting with a climb on to a wide plateau, about 200 feet high and then crossing the Banias River toward the Syrian camp.

We trained for a further three weeks, trying to anticipate all the things that might go wrong. Syrian patrols, and anti-personnel mines, were at the top of my list. In studying detailed maps of the area which I got from our army's northern

command, both potential perils seemed to be almost everywhere along the stretch of border which we'd be crossing.

The timing of the operation was chosen by the cycle of the moon. We wanted to cross into Syria in as near to total darkness as possible. That meant the last couple of days of September 1962. As the operation drew nearer, we reviewed and refined our plans with the technological unit. Even though the bugging device had been improved, and they'd done their best to match the outer casing to old photos of Syrian telephone poles, we decided to take four of the units with us, each with a slightly different design. If we managed to make it there and back without getting caught, we would install the unit that most closely matched the real isolator. We would then take an up-to-date photo, so that the tech people could refine the casing design, and on the next operation, we could simply swap in the new unit.

Avraham, usually brimming with self-confidence, called me in repeatedly in the early weeks of September, and had me run through every detail with him. He even arranged for us do a full run-through – though, as he knew, it was a far-from-realistic simulation, and not only because there were no Syrian troops, or mines. We held it in the south of the country, in the Negev, not too far from where I'd done my *tironut*, totally different terrain from the Golan. Still, for one reason alone, it was worth doing: he had convinced Meir Har-Zion to attend. Not only was Meir a veteran of countless freelance crossings into Syria. It was he who had led the series of *successful* intercept operations on the Golan before the mission that went so horribly wrong. Avraham said nothing during the entire run-through. Nor did Meir. But when we'd finished, they called me over.

"Well?" Avraham asked.

"They don't need me," Meir replied. "They know what they're doing." It was a hugely reassuring vote of support for me and the team. And a huge relief for Avraham.

The core of our team was the three members I'd inhereted from of Ya'akov Tubul. Two of them were bright, brave, young Sephardi Jews. Motti Naggar had been born in Cairo. Kuti Sharabi was one of the many thousands of Yemeni Jewish immigrants who had by now settled in the economically disadvantaged Hatikvah neighborhood, in southeastern Tel Aviv. In fact, from the beginning, the major role played by Jews of non-European origin was a distinguishing trait of Sayeret Matkal. Since it was created as an intelligence unit, designed to infiltrate into Arab countries, there was, of course, a premium on recruits who could speak Arabic. The important, in ways the leading, role of the Sephardim also made life in the sayeret a stark contrast to the rest of Israeli society, where the inequalities of wealth and of power I'd witnessed as a child on the kibbutz had only gotten wider. I had seen the effects even more starkly in the few years before joining the sayeret, especially during the time I'd spent with Yigal Garber in the fields near the Yemeni moshav in the Negev.

Many of the new Sephardi arrivals – Yemenis, but also Iraqis and especially Moroccan Jews – settled in the south of the country, in conditions that were not only physically difficult but economically even tougher. One image, in particular, seared itself into my memory. It was on a spring evening, when Yigal and I had finished work in the moshav fields and, as usual, went for dinner in Ofakim. Just a few miles west of Beersheva, Ofakim was one of the new, 1950s

communities called, euphemistically, “development towns”. In fact, they were places which the government used to move the new immigrants out of transit camps where, in some cases, they’d now lived for several years. The “restaurant” was a business which one of the Moroccan families had set up in the dining room of their tiny home. The food was traditional North African, and delicious. The speciality was *marak shuit*, a tomato-based soup with beans and a small piece of lamb or chicken. The dining space was lit with a single, naked, 30-watt bulb. The only other light came from the bluish flame underneath a butane cooker. On that night – the sixth or seventh time we’d been there – I was startled by a sudden movement just a couple of feet away from where I was sitting. I looked for the source. I spotted a weathered wooden box, the kind that we used on the kibbutz to crate oranges. It was filled with hay. At first, I thought the stirring from inside was the family pet. But then, looking closer, I saw it was a baby.

Shocked though I was, I said nothing until we’d paid and left. “Was that really a child?” I asked Yigal. “A *baby*?” He replied, with a tinge of sadness but also something that seemed to convey surprise at my naivety: “Yes. They don’t have enough space for him in the house.”

Israel was clearly having trouble making space for the post-1948 immigrants from the Arab world. Nominally, they were part of the founding vision of the state. Their arrival had been celebrated as a kind of act of redemption and hope. But the reality was that both economically and politically, the power in our young country lay almost exclusively with the ethnically European Jews, the *Ashkenazim*. Even among the Ashkenazim, there was a kind of self-defined elite within an elite: the kibbutzniks and moshavniks. In later years, after the

Ashkenazi establishment had been shunted out of government and began to discover a capacity for irony, a humorous anagram gained currency to describe its continuing dominance in many other areas of society: WASP. It did not mean "white Anglo-Saxon Protestant" as in the US. The Israeli version was "white Ashkenazi sabras with *protekziya*." *Protekziya*, in English, means "connections".

For Avraham Arnan, the desire to attract and include Sephardim in his sayeret was not just about speaking Arabic. It was about an attitude that they brought, which he sensed was much rarer in the kind of kibbutz kids, however smart or tough, whom Arik Sharon had favored in building Unit 101. Their life, since arriving in Israel, had been so much tougher in so many ways. Avraham valued not just their intelligence, but their street smarts. There was one incident which brought this into sharp focus – and which, I'm sure, also marked the start of Meir Har-Zion's gradual drifting away from his involvement in the sayeret. It happened on a rainy evening in the winter of 1959, a few months before I arrived. I heard about it, in similar versions, from the people who were actually there. It occurred during a night reconnaissance exercise, under Meir's supervision, starting on the border with the West Bank and end in Ashkelon, across Israel, on the Mediterranean coast. Meir split the group into four teams. He sent each on a different route. Each of them had to go through a series of designated points along the way, and write down detailed notes of everything they'd seen. Meir, after doing spot-checks on each of the groups at the beginning of the trek, headed to Ashkelon to await their arrival.

When they showed up, he could see instantly, from their notes, that they had cut corners. They were lying to him. Only one team had played by the rules. It

was Yechiel Amsalem's. He was old school. Though ethnically Yemenite, he was not a post-1948 immigrant. He had grown up in Haifa. He'd attended Reali, one of the oldest and finest high schools in the country, with close ties with the Technion. Its motto was "Zionism, humanism, tolerance, democracy." He couldn't bring himself to cheat. But the other three teams, in a co-ordinated operation as soon as Meir left for the coast, had driven directly to Ashkelon, taken in a movie and a meal, walked around outside to make sure they arrived suitably drenched, and showed up at the reporting point.

Meir was outraged: this ran against every value he'd insisted on with in his – mostly kibbutznik – fighters in Company A. He went to Avraham and told him that the sayeret was never going to amount to anything if it had *guys like this*. He didn't explicitly say that we needed kibbutznikim, not Sephardim. He would never had put it that way: for him, the issue was not ethnicity. It was efficacy. But that was the obvious implication. For Avraham, however, the sayeret *needed* people who knew, from experience, how to deal with real-life obstacles. He was upset that they'd lied to Meir, of course. He told them so. But he prized the kind of instinct and initiative which they'd shown. It was the kind of instinct that came from growing up in development towns or the poorer neighborhoods of Tel Aviv or Haifa or Petach Tikvah, having to fight for what they had got in life. It was also the diametric opposite of the kind of life which kibbutzniks like me had led. Mishmar Hasharon had struggled financially and economically as I was growing up. But I had never seen crime, if you didn't count the petty transgressions I'd committed myself. I had never seen an armed robbery. A knife fight. A murder. A prostitute. All of these were part of the landscape in which many of our unit's first Sephardi recruits had come of age.

And as I made final preparations with the team I was going to lead into Syria, I had no doubt that if we ran into trouble, we would need not only the technical expertise, but the native intelligence, of Motti Nagar and Kuti Sharabi to get through it. The third member of the Tubul team was, in fact, a kibbutznik. His name was Moshe Moshiko, and he brought two very different qualities. One of them was obviously going to be indispensible: an almost squirrel-like ability to climb trees. Or, in this case, telephone poles. The other, of which I was a lot more leery, was a total, and deeply irrational, absence of any fear. As my deputy for the operation – fulfilling the role I'd played with Ya'akov Tubul on the dry run into Lebanon – I brought in Avi Telem. A recent arrival from the Golani Brigade, he was steady, smart, and had first-hand experience of the terrain along the border which we were going to cross.

Two days before we were due to set off, Avraham arranged for me to be taken on a reconnaissance flight, in a civilian Piper Cub, along our side of the post-1948 armistice line along the Golan. The pilot was under orders not to wander into Syrian airspace, so there wasn't much to see beyond the plateau where we were going to begin our infiltration. Even on the plateau, there was no sign of the frequent troop patrols, or the nearly unbroken line of mines, which were marked on the Israeli army map that I had spread across my knees. Was the map wrong? Possibly. I did spot what seemed to be well-trodden footpaths leading in from the edge of the plateau, and decided we'd try to use one of them, on the assumption they were less likely to be mined. In any case, there was no time to dig further into how the information on the map had been put together. And there was no way I could ignore the warnings on the map, given the ever-more-obvious concern at the highest level of the army that our

operation, like Uri Ilan's, might end in disaster.

The night before we were due to leave Sirkin for the north, Avraham got a phone call from Tzvi Tzur, the chief-of-staff himself. He wanted to see me the next morning, for a personal briefing on the operation. I tried to get Avraham to say no. I pointed out that if we didn't manage to get underway by ten o'clock at the latest, we'd risk throwing everything off schedule. After some back-and-forth with Tzur's office, it was agreed I would meet him at 9 am, at a gas station near Herzliya north of Tel Aviv, and join him for the 20-minute drive along the coast to Netanya, where he had an engagement. To my surprise, he drove himself. I settled into the passenger's seat. Though Tzur had been a battalion commander in the 1948 war, his main strength, and main focus, as chief-of-staff were strategic. He was not viewed as a details man. Still, before we even set off, he asked me to unfold the map I'd brought with me and talk him through, step by step, how we planned to proceed. The more we talked, the more I sensed that these details weren't what he really wanted to know. Given the legacy of 1954, he was, understandably, worried. But I think that what he actually wanted to gauge was whether *I* felt confident in our preparations, and our ability to succeed. He wanted to reassure himself he wasn't taking any more than the obvious risks in sending us into Syria. He must have got what he wanted, because when we stopped at a second gas station, on the edge of Netanya, he shook my hand, wished me luck, and went on his way.

The rest of the team had arrived in Netanya just before us. Two teams, in fact: my own group of four, with whom I'd be crossing the border in less than 10 hours' time, and our *shilutz,* or back-up, team under Yori Cohen's command. A *shilutz* was always part of our sayeret procedure, even when we'd just been

doing exercises. Yori's team would remain on the Israeli side of the border. If we got into trouble, they'd come in after us.

We still had a last stop to make: at the headquarters of the army's northern command, in Nazareth. It was housed in a Tegart fort – one of the dozens of reinforced-concrete structures, with watchtowers on the thick outer walls, built by the British during their mandatory rule in Palestine. The new northern commander, recently moved from heading the southern command, was an almost equally forbidding figure. Avraham Yoffe had served in the British artillery corps in the Second World War. He commanded the Golani Brigade in 1948. Physically imposing, he used to joke with other senior officers that while they looked like a bunch of kids, he was the only one with the true bearing of a general. He wasn't wrong. He must have been busy when we arrived, because we ended up hanging around in the vast outer courtyard of the fort for nearly 20 minutes. Just off to the side of the main entry door was a beautifully polished jeep. It had a padlocked metal grill on the back that held two jerrycans of gasoline. Yori and I both spotted the fuel containers at the same time, and we couldn't help smiling. Yes, we were finally about to embark on our first real operation. But we were still the old Sayeret Matkal. And we were still chronically short of gasoline. As Yori stood guard and provided cover, I picked the lock on the grill, took out the jerrycans, one for each of our trucks, and closed it up again.

After briefing General Yaffe, we headed north to our setting-off point. The general joined Avraham Arnan and Meir Amit's intelligence deputy, Aharon Yariv, in the rear command post for our mission, about 10 miles back from the Golan.

The sun had set by around six o'clock, but we wanted to wait for full darkness. So it was nearer to nine when we finally crossed the border. I led the way, with Moshe Moshiko, Motti Nagar, Kuti Sharabi and, finally, Avi Telem behind. Unlike the dry run into Lebanon, where we'd worn civilian clothes, we were in uniform. We had backpacks, carrying the bugging devices and other assorted equipment. Each of us also had an Uzi. Obviously, our hope was to avoid running into Syrian troops. But if we did, we would be following Unit 101 rules: don't ask, or answer, questions. Fire. In that sense at least, I was confident that our mission was not going to be a repeat of 1954.

The winding ascent onto the plateau wasn't too tough. We'd endured worse in training. And when we got to the top, there was no obvious sign of any Syrian soldiers. Still, we had to take things slowly. The moonless night had the advantage of making us more difficult to spot. But it worked the other way, too. There were no night-vision goggles back then. I did have a pair of binoculars, but they weren't much use. They just let me see a bit further onto the murky, featureless landscape ahead. My immediate concern was mines, and even in daylight they might have been impossible to see. Still, before long, I did manage to locate one of the the footworn paths I'd spotted from the Piper Cub.

I'd been nervous before we'd set out. But the nerves were gone now. I was focused completely on the next few seconds, the next few feet, ahead of us. I also found myself recalling something Meir Har-Zion had told me just after I joined the sayeret, about the first time he had been under fire. He'd been scared, he told me. *Everyone* was scared. But he had also been in command, and he realized that if he didn't hide any fears and just press ahead, there was no way anyone in his right mind was going to follow him.

We made it across the plateau safely, but almost immediately faced trouble. The route we'd chosen towards the southern edge of the Syrian military base required us to cross the Banias River, one of the three upper tributaries of the Jordan. The summer months had been dry. The crunch of the leaves underfoot had already prompted me to tell the others to take things more slowly as we descended into the gorge. But the river was higher, and in much fuller flow, than we expected. After spending a good 20 or 30 minutes scouting the bank, we settled on what appeared to be the shallowest part, yet even there it was not exactly a stream. In all our training, we'd never practiced this kind of crossing. The only remotely useful piece of equipment I could find in our backpacks was two 25-foot lengths of parachute wire. It was very strong, but also hard to grip without cutting your hands. We spliced the two stretches of wire together. I took the lead end and waded across the river first. Very quickly, I sunk up to above my chest, but, fighting the flow, managed to make my way to the other side. Then, with Avi on the other bank holding his end of the wire, the three others used it to cross, managing to stay at least a bit drier. Then, Avi followed.

Both he and I were now soaking wet. We were also well behind schedule. It was midnight, and we had covered less than half of our three-mile route to the telephone poles behind the Syrian base. We were under explicit orders from both Meir Amit and Avraham that, whatever happened, we were to turn back to Israel by 1:15 in the morning. Barely an hour away. The last thing they wanted was for us to be still in Syria when daylight broke.

We began climbing into the heart of the Golan Heights, toward the southern edge of the Banias base. The path got steeper, and rockier, as we went. Within 10 minutes or so, we found ourselves in a more wooded area, with a thick

covering of dry leaves. We were still some distance from the army camp. But we were making a fair amount of noise, so I got the others to follow me at a distance of 40 or 50 feet as we made our way nearer to the fort. It wasn't a huge installation. But it was nearly the size of Mishmar Hasharon, with a several hundred troops. It sat behind an inner wall and a long, indifferently maintained, barbed-wire fence on the outer perimeter. For a half-hour or so, we moved forward in a kind of rubber-band formation. I would advance, crouching, as quietly as I could, 50 feet at a time. I would then lie down, scan the area ahead with my binoculars for any obvious danger, and wave the others to follow. It was slow going. But better than the alternative.

Then, as I prepared to move forward again, I felt a tug on my shoulder. It was Moshiko. "Ehud," he said. "We've got to move faster. We won't get there in time." I told him not to worry. "Wait here, till the others catch up with you. As long as we stay quiet, we'll be fine." Still, whether through impatience or growing confidence, by the time the outer fence of the camp did finally come into view, the gap between me and the others had narrowed. They were now barely 10 or 15 feet behind me.

It was then that I suddenly heard the sound of movement ahead of us.

I motioned the others to crouch down. At first, I thought it was an animal. The Golan was known for its wild boars. But as I stood absolutely still, looking around, I noticed, about 30 feet in front of us, a group of five Syrian soldiers. They were lying on a bit of rocky scrubland by the edge of the fence. And they were fast asleep. Or at least they seemed to be. I maneuvered my Uzi into firing position, just in case. We waited, for a minute. Then two. By which time, it was

clear they really were sleeping.

Then, from directly behind me, another sound.

It was the loud hiss of Avi's two-way radio, followed by two or three clipped sentences, in Hebrew. We were using an early Motorola, without the squelch button of the later models, so there was no way to mute the sound. I was concerned we'd end up waking the Syrians. Scared, in fact. As Meir Har-Zion had said to me about his first live operation, who wouldn't be? But I can also truthfully say that the fear – a slight, sudden, tightening in the chest – had come and gone, almost like a shudder, by the time Avi had drawn up beside me.

"Ehud," he whispered. "It's 1:15. They told me that we've got to turn back."

"Turn off the radio," I replied, my hand on his elbow, reassuringly I hoped, as I shepherded him and the others back a full 100 feet or so from the sleeping Syrians. "Keep the radio off," I said once we were at a safe distance. "We can call them later. *Yihyeh beseder*," I added, just loud enough so the rest of the team could hear. "It'll be fine."

We now took a wider arc around the camp. We began to move more quickly for the final mile to the road that led toward Quneitra. Given the somnolence of the sentries, I felt pretty confident we wouldn't encounter another Syrian patrol. And while I knew I might find myself in trouble for not returning to Israel as ordered, I was certain we'd have a much easier, and faster, return trip. After all, I knew what had held us up on the way in: finding a path on the plateau that was clear of mines, locating a place to cross the swollen river, and a general unfamiliarity of the terrain. None of those would apply now. I knew in my mind we could get the job done, and still reach Israel before daybreak. I also didn't

want to waste time radioing back in order to make, and very possibly lose, that argument.

As we got closer to the Quneitra road, Avi did ask me a couple of more times whether we should turn the radio back on. “Don’t worry,” I said. “They’ll just assume we’re already on our way back.”

It was about two o’clock when we finally made it to the road. We found a telephone pole set a bit back, on the edge of a field. Avi and I acted as lookouts. We selected the intercept device that seemed the most similar to the real Syrian isolator. Moshe Moshiko climbed onto the shoulder of Kuti Sharabi, who double-checked the device to make sure it was in order. Moshe scampered up the pole, installed it, and brought back the original unit. The entire operation took less than 10 minutes.

As I’d anticipated, we moved more quickly on the way back. By shortly after 3:15 we had recrossed the river. “You can turn on the radio,” I told Avi, and when he’d done so, he handed it to me. Meir Amit had evidently joined his deputy in the command post during the night, and he was the one who answered. “We’re on our way back,” I told Meir. “Mission accomplished.”

By the time we had crossed the plateau and begun climbing back down toward Israel, it was beginning to get light. I figured we were near enough to the border to make it unlikely we’d shot at. Still, there was always the risk we’d be seen from the heights, and I was relieved when we finally reached the makeshift mound of boulders that passed for a shrapnel barrier on the outskirts of Kibbutz Dan. As soon as we stepped behind it, I saw that Meir, and Avraham too, were waiting there for us. Meir shook my hand, smiling broadly. Avraham grabbed

each of us, one by one, in a bear hug.

Then, drawing me aside, he said that, while this really didn't *matter* in the great scheme of things, I had only narrowly missed landing myself in very deep trouble. I assumed my transgression was shutting down the radio, and disobeying the order to return. But it turned out that Meir's deputy, Aharon Yariv, had fought that particular battle with General Yoffe, and won. "The commander of the Sayeret Matkal unit is the only one who can judge what's happening," he'd told the general when the radio had gone dead. Though Yoffe couldn't know, he obviously suspected we'd simply turned it off. "We have to leave it to him," Yariv told him. "He is the *ramat kal be shechtach*." The chief-of-staff on the ground.

Yet the real battle with General Yoffe was about something else entirely, and it had required all of Meir Amir's own powers of persuasion to defuse it: Yoffe had discovered that his jerrycans of gasoline had disappeared. And he had insisted that both Yori and me, if and when I returned from the Golan Heights, be handed over to the MPs.

I don't know what I would have said if he'd asked me directly whether I was the guilty party. But in the mix of celebration and simple relief that the Syrian operation had succeeded, I got away with what amounted to a plea-bargain.

I promised both Meir and Avraham – at least one of whom believed me – that it would not happen again.